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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/xxi.2.170>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-154996>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Schubiger, Maria (1967). Vowel Quality in Unstressed Syllables. *ELT Journal*, XXI(2):170-178.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/xxi.2.170>

# Vowel Quality in Unstressed Syllables

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IT IS CHARACTERISTIC of present-day spoken English that in unstressed syllables vowels and some diphthongs are often reduced to a neutral sound of little sonority, mostly ə, often ɪ, occasionally u. Spelling gives no hint as to whether the reduction takes place or not. We say prefect 'prɪ:fekt but perfect 'pɜ:fɪkt, Lapland 'læplænd but Finland 'fɪnlənd, August 'ɔ:gəst but august ɔ:'gəst, formality fɔ:'mælɪtɪ but forgetfulness fə'getfɪnlɪs and so on. It seems a perfect maze. On closer observation, however, we discover various motive forces which either favour vowel reduction or tend to check it. It is the purpose of this article to give an account of these forces, so that the student of English may more easily thread his way through the maze.

## I. Unstressed Syllables of Polysyllabic Words

1. *Rhythm* plays a prominent part. There is a tendency in English to reduce syllables adjacent to the stressed one, and to place a subsidiary stress on those at one remove from it. The semi-stressed syllable preserves its vowel quality.<sup>1</sup> This occurs almost regularly before the main stress, e.g.

magazine ,mægə'zɪ:n, politician, pəl'tɪʃn, artisan ,ɑ:tɪ'zæn

transformation ,trænsfə'meɪʃn, economic ,ɪ:kə'nɒmɪk

Compare: remain rɪ'meɪn with recognition ,rekəg'nɪʃn

prosaic prə'zeɪɪk with provocation ,prɒvə'keɪʃn

defend dɪ'fend with degradation ,degrə'deɪʃn

*Note.* This alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, of strong and weak vowels, is sometimes overridden by the tendency to preserve in a derivative the stress and vowel of the word it is derived from, in other words by *analogy*.

We say examination ɪg,zæmɪ'neɪʃn (to examine ɪg'zæmɪn)

appendicitis ə,pendɪ'saɪtɪs (appendix ə'pendɪks)

pronunciation prə,nʌnsɪ'eɪʃn (to pronounce prə'naʊns)

but canalization ,kənəlaɪ'zeɪʃn (to canalize 'kənəlaɪz)

harmonization ,hɑ:mənaɪ'zeɪʃn (to harmonize

'hɑ:mənaɪz)

characteristic ,kærəktə'rɪstɪk (character 'kærəktə)

<sup>1</sup>All we can say for certain is that the two phenomena are interdependent. A subsidiary stress favours the preservation of the full vowel; a full vowel produces the impression of a subsidiary stress.

Likewise, the frequent preservation of a strong vowel in the syllable immediately preceding that carrying the main stress is in many cases supported by analogy, e.g.

virginity və:'dʒɪnɪtɪ (virgin 'və:dʒɪn)  
 fertility fə:'tɪlɪtɪ (fertile 'fə:tal)  
 formality fɔ:'mælɪtɪ (formal 'fɔ:məl)  
 mortality mɔ:'tælɪtɪ (mortal 'mɔ:tl)  
 normality nɔ:'mælɪtɪ (normal 'nɔ:məl)  
 morbidity mɔ:'bɪdɪtɪ (morbidity 'mɔ:bɪd)

A subsidiary stress can also fall on a syllable at one remove *after* the main stress, e.g.

intellect 'ɪntəˌlekt, dialect 'daɪəˌlekt, catalogue 'kætəˌlɒg,  
 dialogue 'daɪəˌlɒg, episode 'epɪˌsɒd, cataract 'kætəˌrækt,  
 gramophone 'græməˌfəʊn, telegram 'telɪˌgræm,  
 caravan 'kærəˌvæn, atmosphere 'ætməsˌfɪə,  
 escalator 'eskəˌleɪtə, refrigerator rɪˈfrɪdʒəˌreɪtə.

But very often two or three completely unstressed syllables, with weak vowels, follow upon the main stress,<sup>1</sup> e.g.

hurricane 'hʌrɪkən, calendar 'kæləndə, vegetable 'vedʒətəbl,  
 comfortable 'kʌmfətəbl, melancholy 'melənˌkɒli,  
 particular pəˈtɪkjələ, graduate 'grædʒuɪt,  
 experiment ɪkˈsperɪmənt.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Frequency* and therefore *familiarity* of a word favours reduction; while unfamiliarity often checks it, even in a syllable adjacent to the full stress. Compounds are good instances in point:

We must say England, Holland, Finland, Shetland, Switzerland, Northumberland, highland, lowland (-lənd).

But we can say Lapland, Thailand, Greenland (-lənd), and we must say Heligoland, Disneyland, wonderland, fairyland (-lənd).

We say milkman, postman, chairman (of a meeting), footman (-mən); but snowman, chairman (in a park) (-mən); gentleman (-mən); but handyman (-mən).

We must say strawberry, blackberry, bilberry, raspberry (-bəri); but we can say dewberry (-beri).

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, holiday, Saturday can be pronounced -deɪ or -di; Doomsday, Boxing-day only -deɪ.

Weakening of vowel quality is on the increase today, e.g.

despot 'despɒt, 'despət; product 'prɒdʌkt, 'prɒdækt;

<sup>1</sup>The end of a word resists detrition much less than the beginning. This is a phenomenon observable in many languages and at many stages of their evolution.

<sup>2</sup>Verbs in -ment and -ate carry a secondary stress on the suffix, which retains its full vowel; e.g. to experiment ɪksˈperɪˌment, to separate ˈsepəˌreɪt. Some nouns can be stressed and pronounced like the corresponding verbs: estimate ˈestɪˌmeɪt or ˈestɪmɪt, associate əˈsouʃlɪˌeɪt or əˈsouʃɪt.

suburb 'sʌbə:b, 'sʌbəb; record 'rekɔ:d, 'rekəd;

garage 'gæɹɑ:ʒ, 'gæɹɪdʒ.

Many words resist this trend, especially those in *ou* and *(j)u:*; e.g.

window 'wɪndou, shadow 'ʃædou, narrow 'nærou,

piano 'pjænou, tomato tə'mɑ:tou, nephew 'nevju:, argue 'ɑ:gju:,

value 'vælju:, tissue 'tɪsju:.<sup>1</sup>

3. *Meaning*, namely the fading of the meaning of the component elements of a compound word, is responsible for many sound reductions, some of long standing.

Compare saucepan 'sɔ:spən with ashpan 'æʃpən, stewpan 'stju:pən, and with sauceboat 'sɔ:sbout

cupboard 'kʌbəd with blackboard 'blækbo:d and with

cupbowl 'kʌpboul

forehead 'fɔ:ɪd with spearhead 'spiəhed and with

forelock 'fɔ:lɒk

shepherd 'ʃepəd with goatherd 'gouthə:d and with

sheepskin 'ʃl:pskɪn

walnut 'wɔ:lnʌt(-nʌt) with peanut 'pi:nʌt and with

wall fruit 'wɔ:lfru:t

chestnut 'tʃesnʌt(-nʌt) with peanut 'pi:nʌt and with

chest-note 'tʃestnɔt.

*Note.* There is a reaction today against the ever-increasing reduction of sounds and the resulting discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation. It is called spelling pronunciation. Here are a few examples:

waistcoat 'weɪskɔt is newer than 'weskət.

landscape 'lændskeɪp is practically the only form today;

'lænskɪp is old-fashioned.

comrade 'kɒmreɪd is newer than 'kɒmɪd, 'kamɪd.

venison 'venɪzn is newer than 'venzn.

Which weak sound—ə, ɪ, u or zero—is appropriate in a given word?

The least sonorous vowel is ə. All the open or semi-open vowels (æ, ɑ:, ɔ, ɔ:, ʌ, ɐ:) are reduced to ə; e.g.

accept ək'sept, herself hə'self, steadfast 'stedfəst,

to contest kən'test, Augustine ə'gastɪn, to subject səb'dʒekt.

With a few exceptions, also e can be reduced to ə, but here there is the alternative ɪ. Side by side with ə, ɪ appears chiefly in prefixes and suffixes; e.g.

become bɪ'kʌm bə-, defend dɪ'fend də-, prefer prɪ'fə: prə-,

return rɪ'tə:n rə-, actress 'æktrɪs -əs, friendless 'frendlɪs -ləs,

fondness 'fɒndnɪs -nəs, pocket 'pɒkɪt -ət, quickest 'kwɪkɪst -əst,

linen 'lɪnɪn -ən.

<sup>1</sup> 'wɪnde, 'nevl are sub-standard pronunciations.

There is the same alternative with the suffixes -ace, -ate, -ain; e.g. palace 'pælis -əs, private 'praɪvɪt -ət, captain 'kæptɪn -ən. The suffix -age, however, is always pronounced -ɪdʒ; e.g. package 'pækɪdʒ, damage 'dæmɪdʒ, village 'vɪlɪdʒ.

In all these prefixes and suffixes ə is gaining ground.<sup>1</sup> With the grammatical endings -es and -ed reduction to ə is not received pronunciation (RP) and should be avoided. It blurs the difference between many pairs of words, such as offices 'ɒfɪsɪz, officers 'ɒfɪsəz, raises 'reɪzɪz, razors 'reɪzəz, counted 'kauntɪd, countered 'kauntəd. For the same reason ə is avoided with effect 'ɪfekt, except ɪk'sept, precede pri'si:d. This distinguishes them from affect ə'fekt, accept ək'sept, proceed prə'si:d.

The sound l is normally not reduced to ə; e.g. Latin 'lætɪn, habit 'hæbɪt, animal 'æniməl.<sup>2</sup>

The diphthong aɪ is either preserved or reduced to ɪ. In the initial syllable di- it is mostly reduced; e.g. to digest dɪ'dʒest, direct dɪ'rekt, dilemma dɪ'lemə, divan dɪ'væn. It is preferably preserved in minute (adj.) maɪ'nju:t, idyllic aɪ'dɪlɪk, finance faɪ'næns, identity aɪ'dentɪtɪ, tribunal traɪ'bju:nəl. It is always preserved in ideal aɪ'diəl, gigantic dʒaɪ'gæntɪk, finality faɪ'nælɪtɪ, criterion kraɪ'tɪəriən, priority praɪ'ɔrɪtɪ, migration maɪ'grɛɪʃn, triangular traɪ'æŋɡjʊlə, and in most words in -ile: agile 'ædʒaɪl, hostile 'hɒstaɪl, textile 'tekstaɪl, senile 'si:nail.<sup>3</sup> It is also preserved in many words in -ite: contrite 'kɒntraɪt, appetite 'æpətaɪt, parasite 'pærəsəɪt, dynamite 'daɪnəmaɪt.

The diphthong ou is either preserved or reduced to ə, occasionally to u; e.g. diplomatic dɪplə'mætɪk, irrevocable ɪ'revəkəbl.

*Elision of the unstressed vowel is very frequent in quick speech; e.g. history 'hɪstri, terrifically tə'rɪfɪkəlɪ,<sup>4</sup> university jʊni'və:stɪ, Catholic 'kæθəlɪk, prisoner 'prɪznə, properly 'prɒplɪ, I expect aɪ'kspekt. Some elisions are still considered very colloquial, e.g. cigarette slg'ret, possible 'pɒsbl.*

Sometimes a possible confusion of two meanings prevents the elision. Compare business, sometimes spelt busyness 'bɪznəs (state of being busy), with business 'bɪznəs (enterprise)

practically 'præktɪkəlɪ (in a practical way) with  
practically 'præktɪkəlɪ (nearly, so to speak)  
awfully 'ɔ:flɪ (terribly) with awfully 'ɔ:flɪ (very).

<sup>1</sup>Some British speakers react unfavourably to this ə even today. Some time ago a reviewer of a radio play based on *Pride and Prejudice* wrote: 'I wish they didn't call her Miss Bennet'.

<sup>2</sup>Americans tend to say 'lætən, 'hæbət, etc.

<sup>3</sup>Americans say 'ædʒɪl, 'hɒstɪl, etc.

<sup>4</sup>Spelt also *terrificly*.

Elision does not always reduce the number of syllables. The adjacent consonant—mostly l or n—may become syllabic. This, too, is very frequent; e.g. happen 'hæpən, version 'və:ʃən, useful 'ju:ʃəl, ordinary 'ɔ:dənəl, marshal mə:ʃəl, cardinal 'kɑ:dənəl.<sup>1</sup> The same phenomenon can be observed in short sentences; e.g. Get along 'get|ɔŋ, never mind 'nev'maɪnd.

Between two nasals, however, elision is inadmissible in RP; e.g. woman 'wʊmən, German 'dʒə:mən; also between stop+nasal and nasal; e.g. London 'lʌndən, Anthony 'æntəni.

On the other hand elision is compulsory with -ten, -den, -ton, -don, -tan, -dan following upon a vowel; e.g. kitten 'kɪtən, Eden 'i:dən, Newton 'nju:tən, Gordon 'gɔ:dən, Satan 'seɪtən, Wodan 'wʊdən. It is optional if a consonant precedes, e.g. golden 'gəʊld(ə)n, Boston 'bɒst(ə)n. It is also optional with -tern, -dern, -tain; e.g. pattern 'pæt(ə)n, modern 'mɒd(ə)n, curtain 'kɜ:t(ə)n, captain 'kæpt(ə)n.

As a result of elision consonant clusters like pl, kr emerge. They are not, however, at least not in the early stage after the elision took place, quite identical with the same clusters of long standing. Contrary to pl, cr in words like please plɪ:z, cry kraɪ,<sup>2</sup> where l and r are devoiced under the influence of the preceding voiceless consonant, these new clusters have a voiced second consonant; e.g. police plɪ:s, career kriə. The ə has disappeared, but in disappearing has left its mark upon the following consonant. Here are some phrases and sentences for comparison:

Please call the police 'plɪ:z 'kɔ:l ðə 'plɪ:s

Two ships collided on the Clyde 'tu: 'ʃɪps 'klaɪdɪd ɒn ðə 'klaɪd

A cranky career ə 'kræŋki 'kriə.

The last stage, elision without leaving a trace, was reached long ago with words like history 'hɪstəri, pram (perambulator) prəm, perhaps præps. It has been reached by some speakers of RP with solicitor 'sɒlɪstə, police station 'plɪ:s steɪʃn, though less frequently with police plɪ:s.

*Note.* By this process *new consonant clusters* have emerged, or are on the point of emerging, which have for a long time been absent from the phonemic set-up of English:

*Initial kn-* It disappeared in the 15-17th centuries in words like 'to know, knife'. It is reappearing in words like 'to connect'.

*R+consonant* It disappeared in the 16-17th centuries in words like 'learnt'. It is reappearing in words like 'parent, apparent'.

<sup>1</sup>ŋ, | stand for syllabic n, l.

<sup>2</sup>l̥, r̥ stand for devoiced l, r.

- Initial pn-* The p is not sounded in pneumonia, pneumatic. But pn- is pronounced by some speakers in Penelope, peninsula.
- Initial mn* The m is not sounded in mnemonic, but mn- is pronounced by some speakers in menagerie, minority.

## II. Grammatical Form Words

Grammatical form-words can be reduced in a way similar to that in the weak syllables of content words:

Strong form	.. ..	have hæv	and ænd	of ɒv	but bæt
Reduction of vowel	.. ..	həv	ənd	əv	bət
Elision of the vowel	.. ..		nd	v	
Elision of a consonant	.. ..	əv, v <sup>1</sup>	n	ə	

  

Strong form	.. ..	were wə:	be bi:	him him <sup>3</sup>	
Reduction of vowel	.. ..	wə	bi <sup>3</sup>		
Elision of the vowel	.. ..				
Elision of a consonant	.. ..			im	

Whether we use a reduced form, and which reduced form, depends on various factors, some purely phonetical, some functional.

1. Contrary to the content word, where a difference of speed is rarely responsible for two competing pronunciations, *rapidity of utterance* is of great importance here, e.g.

Slow: you and I 'ju:ənd 'aI

Quick: 'ju: ən 'aI

Slow: a pint of milk ə 'paɪnt əv 'mɪlk  
 ə 'paɪnt ə 'mɪlk<sup>4</sup>

Slow: Look at that balloon 'lʊk ət ðæt bæ'lu:z

Quick: 'lʊk ə ðæt bæ'lu:z<sup>5</sup>

Slow: Yes, sir 'jes sə:

Quick: 'jes sə<sup>6</sup>

*Note.* In very slow, deliberate utterance, such as public speaking, or in the exposition of an intricate theme, form-words often retain

<sup>1</sup>h vanishes most easily when there is an h at the beginning of an adjacent content word, which cannot be dropped; e.g. I saw his house aI 'sɔ: ɪz 'haus, Hunt has hurt his head 'hʌnt əz 'hæ:t ɪz 'hed.

<sup>2</sup>Be, been, she, we, me, he sometimes reduce ɪ: to ɪ in unstressed position; you, who can reduce u: to u.

<sup>3</sup>Him, his, it, its, if, in, with always preserve the vowel i.

<sup>4</sup>Poster: Drinka Pinta Milka Day.

<sup>5</sup>Caption: Looka that bloody Balloon.

<sup>6</sup>Str is an enclitic, i.e. a short unstressed word appended to a stressed one here and therefore treated like a form-word.

their strong vowel. Even the articles are sometimes said without vowel reduction, especially the definite article; e.g.

'We are impressed by the (ðl:) consistency of this young boy,  
by the (ðl:) singlemindedness with which . . .'

'Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a (eɪ) very great pleasure . . .'

2. The pronunciation of a form-word can also depend upon *the following sound*; e.g.

Saint Andrew snt 'ændru:, Saint Thomas sn 'tɒməs<sup>1</sup>

Bill and Alice 'bɪl ənd 'ælis, Bill and Tom 'bɪl ən 'tɒm<sup>2</sup>

At one o'clock ət 'wʌn ə'klɒk, at ten o'clock ə 'ten ə'klɒk

She has fɪ(:) 'hæz, She is fɪ: 'ɪz,<sup>3</sup> to go tə gou, to eat tu l:t

She got rid of us fɪ gɒt 'rɪd əv əs,

She got rid of them fɪ gɒt 'rɪd ə ðəm.<sup>4</sup>

3. *Function* can play a certain part. Some form-words have several grammatical functions, not all equally weighty, and are treated accordingly.

(a) The demonstrative pronoun *that* has no weak form. Even when it is unstressed, it is pronounced ðæt; e.g.

That's your fault ðæts 'juə fɔ:lt, That's difficult ðæts 'dɪfɪkəlt.

*Note.* *This, these, those* are not shortened either, except occasionally *this* in phrases like *this morning, this evening*.

The conjunction and the relative pronoun *that* are pronounced ðæt; e.g.

I know that you are free aɪ 'nou ðæt ju ə 'fri:

It's the best that I can do for you ɪts ðə 'best ðæt aɪ kən 'du: fə ju:.

(b) *Have* (had, has) is reduced considerably when it functions as an auxiliary; e.g. I've seen him aɪv 'si:n hɪm, He's done it hi:z 'dʌn ɪt. It is not reduced when it is a full verb in the meaning of 'to possess', or when it stands for another verb; e.g. We have a Vauxhall wɪ hæv ə 'vɔks'hɔ:l, We have lunch at one o'clock wɪ hæv 'lʌntʃ ət 'wʌn ə'klɒk.

It is not reduced either when it means 'to cause something to be done'; e.g. Last autumn we had our kitchen whitewashed . . . wɪ hæd əwə 'kɪtʃən 'waɪtwɔʃt.

(c) *Some* sm is a partitive word corresponding to French *du*,

<sup>1</sup>Saint, being here a proclitic, behaves like a form-word.

<sup>2</sup>Today ən, ɪ are almost general, whether there follows a vowel or a consonant. With *saint* the t is not dropped before a vowel.

<sup>3</sup>to be at home tə bi(:) ət haʊm, to be in bed tə bi: ɪn bed.

<sup>4</sup>*Of* is most frequently reduced to ə before the similar fricative consonant ð.



de la, des, German *etwas*, *einige*; e.g. Get me some bread and some apples get *mi sm 'bred n sm 'æplz*.

Some *səm* is an indefinite word, corresponding to French *quelque*, German *irgend ein*, *etwelche*; e.g. There must be some secret *ðə 'mʌst bi sɪ 'sl:krit*. I heard with some surprise that . . . *əl 'hɔ:d wið sɪ sə'praɪz* . . .

(d) *Us*, the object case of the pronoun *we* is pronounced *əs*; e.g. He met us in the hall *hi: 'met əs in ðə 'hɔ:l*. He let us off lightly *hi: 'let əs 'ɔf 'laɪtli*.

It is shortened to *s* in the phrase *Let's* . . ., where its grammatical function has faded; e.g. *Let's go to the pictures* *'lets 'gou tə ðə 'pɪktʃəz*.

The following form-words are hardly ever weakened:

*on* *ɔn* on Monday *ɔn 'mʌndi*, It depends on me *ɪt dɪ'pendz ɔn 'mi:*,  
On my desk *ɔn mal 'desk*, Cf. And my desk *ən mal 'desk*.

*or* *ɔ:* One lump or two *'wʌn 'lʌmp ɔ: 'tu:*? Black or white  
*'blæk ɔ: 'waɪt?*

The pronunciation is *ə* in phrases like two or three  
*'tu: ə 'θri:*, for a minute or two *fər ə 'mɪnɪt ə 'tu:*,  
more or less *'mɔ:r ə 'les*.

*their* is always *ðɛə* before a consonant; e.g. their mother  
*ðɛə 'mʌðə*, their books *ðɛə 'bʊks*. It is occasionally *ðə*  
before a vowel, for here it cannot be mistaken for the  
definite article; e.g. their uncles *ðər 'ʌŋklz*.

The indefinite pronoun *there* is pronounced *ðə*. As it  
always precedes a verb, it cannot be mistaken for the  
article.

*your* is nearly always pronounced *jɔ:*; e.g. Your book *jɔ: 'bʊk*.  
In familiar speech it is occasionally reduced to *jə*; e.g.  
What's your name *'wɒts jə 'neɪm?*

*not* is either reduced to non-syllabic *-n̩t* and attached to an  
auxiliary (don't, can't, etc.) or it preserves its full vowel;  
e.g. You mustn't (must not) disturb me *ju 'mʌsnt (mʌst nɒt)*  
*dɪ'stə:b mi:*. Only *cannot* is occasionally reduced to  
*'kænət*.

*my, by* are rarely reduced to *mi, bi*. We say my lord *mi 'lɔ:d*,  
my lady *mi 'leɪdi*. Otherwise *mi* and *bi* are only used  
occasionally in familiar or jocular style; e.g. Come along  
my child *'kʌm ə'loŋ mi 'tʃaɪld*, Never in my life *'nevər ɪn*  
*mi 'laɪf*, You must do it by yourself *ju mʌs 'du: ɪt bi juə'self*.

*Note.* Final prepositions, though unstressed, retain the strong  
vowel; e.g. What are you laughing at *'wɒt ə ju 'lɑ:fɪŋ æt?*

Where have you come from *'weə həv ju 'kʌm frɒm?*

Likewise, a preposition followed by an unstressed personal pronoun very often preserves its strong vowel; e.g. Fortune disposed otherwise of me 'fɔ:tʃn dɪs'pouzɪd 'ʌðəwaɪz ɒv mi: I had great respect for it əl hæd 'greɪt rɪ'spekt fɔ:r ɪt.<sup>1</sup>

## FOR THE YOUNG TEACHER—1

### *The Incidental Presentation of Teaching Items (1)*

A. S. HORNBY

IT IS GENERALLY agreed today that important teaching items should first be presented orally. An oral presentation of the new item by the teacher is followed by oral drills for the class.

It sometimes happens, however, that a new item receives little or no attention during subsequent weeks, or even months. The textbook goes on to deal with other items. Unless the new item is regularly used and practised, pupils are likely to forget it.

There are some teaching items which are unsuitable for drills. They may, however, be suitable for incidental use. A teacher who has a good command of English, and who sees and uses such opportunities, can do much to help his pupils.

This article suggests ways in which items which have been insufficiently drilled, and items which are unsuitable for drills, may be dealt with incidentally.

The interrogative-negative is an example. The teacher may use it incidentally, whenever opportunities occur. He will be using it as it is normally used, in real situations. He will make it clear that an affirmative answer is *expected*, even though, in some cases, the answer may be negative. Here are some possibilities.

(1) A pupil appears not to know something which he may reasonably be expected to know. The teacher looks at him and asks, with a rise in pitch on the appropriate word:

Don't you know what *lend* means?

Don't you know how to spell *friend* yet?

<sup>1</sup>The strong vowel in these unstressed prepositions faintly mirrors the pronunciation of the *stressed* group: preposition + pronoun, where the full stress falls on the preposition, e.g. Chinking glasses: Here's to you hɪəz 'tu: ju. When they are with me . . . 'wen ðel ə 'wið mi: . . .